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A Little War, In a Far Place, Could Escalate

Could an obscure war over some barren islands in the South Atlantic erupt into a major holocaust? Would the United States become embroiled? These questions hang like Antarctic storm clouds over the Falkland Islands.

Certainly the explosive ingredients are present. At this writing, two Argentine submarines, the Salta and San Luis, are stalking British troopships, which are packed with a 7,000-man invasion force. Both subs are equipped with murderous modern technology.

The two troopships, the Queen Elizabeth II and Canberra, are vulnerable to a torpedo attack. The subs would use computer-guided Tigerfish torpedos, which can't miss. The only way a Tigerfish can be stopped is to track it electronically and blow it up in the water before it strikes.

It is not unreasonable to expect the Argentines to try to thwart an invasion of the Falklands by attacking the troopships while they are sitting ducks in the water. The loss of either troopship would be a disaster of a kind the British Navy hasn't

suffered since the early days of World War II.

Their own warships in the South Atlantic are armed with nuclear weapons, and the task force commander has the authority to use them under "grave circumstances." So this little war conceivably could lead to nuclear action.

Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., meanwhile, jumped the gun in tilting toward the British. Many strategists, including some British diplomats, say they believe the United States was more valuable as a mediator. Once the United States abandoned its neutrality it lost the clout to pressure Argentina and Britain into settling the dispute. Now peace depends upon the uncertain mechanisms of the United Nations.

The Pentagon, taking its signal from Haig, also rushed to establish a crisis-management team to support the British. This was put on 12-hour shifts around the clock. Arrangements were made to supply the British with ammunition, spare parts and anything else they needed.

But the British never requested anything except fuel. So after a few days of spinning its wheels the crisis-management team was disbanded.

The British ships in the war zone, however, have enough supplies for only a 90-day siege. If the conflict is not over within 90 days, the British will have to rely increasingly on U.S. support.

This support has already been

pledged. But at a secret White House strategy session President Reagan was asked how far he's willing to go to help the British. He made it clear that the United States will offer supplies but not manpower. No troops, no pilots, not even advisers will be sent into the battle area.

The United States has already shipped fuel to the British base on Ascension Island in the mid-Atlantic. Two U.S. spy satellites are also providing the British with photographs of the Falklands area. But there's one trouble: the cameras can't take pictures through the clouds that overhang the Falklands this time of year.

Other U.S. satellites are able to intercept Argentine communications, which are also passed on to the British. But no substantial assistance has been requested by London.

Bugging Out: The Argentine Embassy here hasn't had an easy time of it since the outbreak of the Falkland Islands conflict last month. In addition to the difficulty of presenting its side of the situation to a generally pro-British American press and public, the embassy has seen its once-warm relations with the Reagan administration grow downright frosty. On top of all this the embassy discovered it had a problem with bugs. Not the usual Washington electronic variety, but living, breathing, crawling insects. On May 7 an exterminator was called in.